

FEMALE BEYOND THE SIGNS

By JOAN FABER

IT IS A PLATITUDE to say that the way in which people act is profoundly influenced by their gender. To try to write about the influence of sexuality on spirituality is a well-nigh impossible task for the two are so united that it is difficult to draw out their separate threads in order to look at their relationship. Writing as a woman, one has an experience to draw upon which is whole. Inevitably what is written will be in the realm of generalities and so probably unhelpful, since each individual woman will have her own experience more or less defined by social expectation and cultural conditioning. Perhaps women today are trying to break through these definitions, to move away from imposed stereotypes and to feel free to be in touch with and to own what is personally theirs. For many people, one of the surprises is that, as this happens, men are being made aware of a great deal of aggression among women and resentment at the way in which they have been relegated to an inferior position and labelled members of the 'weaker sex'. Women have a desire to take on a creative responsibility for this world of ours, to infuse it with a sense of wholeness and accord, to share in divine creativity, to establish a new community in the Spirit.

This underlies for me the meaning of woman's spirituality which is about her relationship with God, other people and the rest of creation in God, as experienced by a person who is living inside a woman's body empowered with woman's sexuality. Spirituality is not something elevated beyond this life, but deeply rooted in it, and women with their intuitive sense of interconnectedness are able to see all the links. Thus, spirituality is not just the life of the 'soul': prayer, worship, mystical union, religious experience of the divine. Outlook on the world is changed when there is religious feeling; on the surface everything is the same, but there is a different light on it; greater love is felt for people. Concentration on the purely religious may not be particularly christian or feminine. What is specific is the new awareness of relationships which

the coming of Jesus and his Spirit introduced into the christian community as an experience of God's presence among and through one another.

Gradually a deeper awareness and tentative enunciation of the dignity and destiny of the christian woman is being explored, but there is a problem here. All experiences that engage one as a human have a physical concomitant, yet one's body has a very limited range of responses. By analogy, experiences are fuller, subtler and more interesting than our description of them, and our physical 'vocabulary' is even more restricted than our store of words. So the difficulty of differentiating and expressing experiences that are informed by sexuality and spirituality is great, particularly for women who are more inclined than men to work with and think in terms of the whole, rather than with an analysis of parts.

Biblically, wisdom is seen as endowed with feminine traits, and today women are using their intuitive wisdom to try again and again, and throughout their personal development, to find the truth in their innermost feelings and so be able with integrity to act upon their preferences—a search for the untainted Spirit. Mary is the model here, she who kept all things in her heart. This implies that women must be unafraid to open themselves up to their own inner darkness. Despite being educated to believe that there is much darkness within them and that they are a distraction to 'spiritual man', they must without fear go inwards and discover their own holiness. Women want to give a new shape to the gospel way of life, to recreate the universe. And for this they wish to reclaim human experience as the place of God's revealing love and presence, and there become ever more attuned to the sacredness of life which is their great gift to the world. Women today are listening, after centuries, to their own thoughts and to their own and their children's nightmares. Women, who bear their future in their children, also do so through giving birth through active faith in the life of the redeemed community.

In the beginning woman was to be partner to man, created like him in the image and likeness of God, rather than in man's image. Many women have experienced their womanhood as a glorification of servility; they resent the consequent falsification of their contribution and attributes. They wish to be neither angels in the home nor sweated labour. The world is seen through gendered eyes, and now women desire that what they see and experience should be placed alongside man's vision to complement it, not to force an

either-or decision.

The social background influences a woman's experience of herself, impinges on and moulds her spirituality, for the Spirit is mediated by social reality as well as by theology and personal experience. Woman resents being dichotomized; there is no distinction to be drawn between her spirituality and her sexuality. She is spiritually and sexually who she is, and that is how she experiences life. She struggles with the existence of a new self-image today in face of a close appreciation of the divine, and this can be a beautiful experience, indeed a birth for some. Woman knows that chaos and confusion merge, that for her, nuances and shades give more meaning than classification and the defining of boundaries. It is unlikely that a woman could have written the ignatian meditation on the Two Standards and the Three Classes of Men, with all the conflict externalized. The woman looks first within and then moves outwards, confronting the outside from her own inner place of conflict. A woman remembers, but this is a process of restructuring events within the total concept of her life, and her perception involves response, as she reaches out to nurture and sustain life. A woman is more likely to focus on the innerness of outward things. A woman, faced with a sense of being on the 'edge' will still just want to be, to try to see how the edge can be both positive and negative, and to befriend it from inside herself. Someone described this as

seeing herself first of all as a carved wooden statue before God, and then on a sailboat becalmed in the middle of a large body of water with no one around and nothing in sight. I just *was*. The statue was me, beautifully carved, and stood before God because God knew I wanted to be with him, but had been meeting him in people all the year. I felt I was outside myself, able to watch myself, not one with myself. The carver, God, seemed understanding and the next thing I knew I was on the sailboat which was God, and I was just there. I began accepting my space, away from all and everything, with God. It was gift, I could just feel life and not want to possess it.

Perhaps that is the constant struggle for women, wanting to give and have life, and yet not possess it.

There is an inescapable original difference between men and women. The girl baby emerges from a being like herself. Birth, always a traumatic experience, is for the girl a continuation of an

indentification with the mother. So a physical separateness goes along with a psychological identification which can last for years. The mother lives again in the daughter, and the daughter lives the mother's life, sharing her activities from the moment she can act at all, even loving the same man. The boy emerges from a being different from himself, and so, being different from or similar to the mother, implants in men and women a pattern which shapes an unconscious assumption of what all relationships should be like. Thus women tend to seek identification with the loved person, to see things as a whole, to be in touch with creation and with the unity of life, and their spirituality will be expressed relationally. Women seem able to ride the tides of feeling, they can wait for the passing of the irrational moods because familiar with their fickleness. Not for nothing is the moon a goddess with her waxing and waning and cyclic life. Women with a diffuse, intuitive awareness rather than a focussed consciousness can have a real difficulty, however, in expressing their deepest thoughts and feelings. Women suffer from an education which honours things of the mind and debases the physical, whereas women think of themselves in holistic terms, body, mind, heart and spirit. They must suffer hurt when their gift of physical creativity is relegated to shady stories and lavatory jokes, and even the natural process of menstruation is called 'the curse'. Mind is on a pedestal, bodies at an animal level—why should woman be designated a bitch? For the woman, the Spirit dwells in her body. She dare not enter into a dualistic mode of thinking: mind/body, spiritual/material. Nothing is profane, and there is an inherent unity in life.

Women do experience a fear that men only want their bodies. If they can feel the recognition that within their body, in the whole of them, there is the Spirit, then can follow a fulfilling abandonment of self in physical encounter. Spiritual attunement as well as sexual intercourse is needed for their inner harmony. Girls struggle for long years with the fear of rape, even long after they have rationally dismissed it. Alas for many it is not just foreboding but actuality, alongside incest. When these girls are continuously presented with God-images that speak of masculinity, father, judge, lawgiver (especially the latter, when the law seems so ineffectual in their defence) they must suffer from an obstacle in achieving a desired relationship. What about Juliana's 'God is Mother in mercy' and Anselm of Canterbury: 'Christ my mother, you gather your children under your wings . . .'?

Women looking for meaning from the inside will bring people and experiences into prayer, rather than leave them on the outside. All the realities of self will be brought in. In touch with the springs of life, with a cosmic awareness of interconnectedness, a sense of the unity of life and desire for relationships, this is the matter for her spirituality. She who enjoys, loves, hates, accepts as a whole, will not want to lose any part of the experience. Women's life-force is a tremendous power, and those who have not lost contact with their unconscious will be in touch with this power. The earliest mythologies and folklore link women with mystical capacities and mysterious forces by virtue of the fact that they menstruate. Fertility, the ability to nurture a new life, is truly an awesome power for men to contemplate and women to possess.

The woman's womb is where the divine and the maternal intertwine. Psalm 22,9-10 shows Yahweh taking the infant from the womb and placing it upon the mother's lap and at her breasts.¹ The tranquillity of the mother suckling her child is the symbol of divine care. The womb, because of the creative work of God, is the place of human equality. It yields its treasure that wholeness and life may happen, and is expression of the transcendence of love which cannot be reconciled with possessiveness. Within the womb every slow movement of growth is indispensable and precious in the Lord's sight. But the experience of pregnancy is varied and many-faceted for each individual mother, let alone for the generality of pregnant women. So how can we speak of a spirituality experienced at this time? The mother can be in touch with God the Creator. She can also be appalled and resistant to that godly aspect, hating too the physical changes that she undergoes within herself, yet also longing to see and hold the flesh of her flesh and bone of her bone. As the time for giving birth draws near, there is increased anxiety, fear, restlessness and hope. There is difficulty in concentrating on anything else. 'How am I constrained until it be accomplished' (Lk 12,50). At this point, birth like death is inevitable, though it can be hastened or delayed psychologically. It can create much anxiety over feared damage to her own body, and the infant can be felt to be intrusively destructive. God moves in, disrupts life, and gives or takes away another life. Birth is often long and painful, but it can also be ecstatic. Whether or not it links to the experience of rebirth in Christ and conversion is for the individual mother to say. Giving birth however can be likened to being God, and can help to deepen an understanding of what

God means. The baby placed in the mother's arms, at her breast, rouses incredulity, wonder, reverence. There is a naked experience of suffering, sacrifice, struggle and joy. Woman, who has an inbuilt longing to make full use of her body, experiences the child in the womb and the milk in the breasts as part of the mystery of life. If there is a sense of an empty womb, there can also be a desire to impregnate it with the source of life, and to hand over the emptiness to be God-filled, to discover fruitfulness in the whole of her and at all times.

Pregnancy is a time of enormously conflicting emotions. Waiting, dependency, suffering, receptivity are all part of this experience. A time of hidden becoming and anxiety: will the child be a hindrance to my life, a triumph or a tragedy? Born for sorrow or for joy? If the ability to be fertile is a powerful force, it involves an experience also of total powerlessness and vulnerability as the outcome is awaited. The womb protects and nourishes, but does not possess a control. God-like creativity can create its own passion. The process of giving birth is one that can best be described as involving total absorption—doing totally just what is being done. Some mothers can say that the experience is a kind of prayer, even though not verbal. The child is powerless, but exercises great power. The mother identified with the child becomes a participant in its powerlessness and so needs to depend on the father; God can be felt to be in the dependable mother or father. With birth and the emergence of new life there is a calling forth of another power, that of response. We know of the depression that can follow birth when the mother is seemingly unable to give the response needed and expected, when love and hate can struggle together in seemingly endless conflict. For some, the realization of the ambivalent position that must have been Mary's, when faced with her unexpected birth, is strengthening. Women's depression is nearly always linked to rupture or the threatened rupture of emotional bonds, and giving birth can ring bells connected with previous separation.

What cannot be discounted for many women today is the anguish they go through during pregnancy because of the easy availability of abortion, and the counselling offered if there is likelihood of the child being born handicapped. Often there is an added strain when the husband insists, while the woman fights for what is part of her life, holding to a respect for what is unrecognized. If abortion has been accepted, the emotional after-effects are strong and can wipe out all sense of that relatedness on which spirituality rests. Guilt,

anger, hurt, denial; these are strong feelings to integrate and they linger and belie forgiveness for a long time. Memories of a miscarriage are equally profound and long-lasting. Something good has been brutally, unjustly destroyed and there is deep unconsolable grief, not made easier by the fact that no ritual mourning is provided. The young mother is depressed, mourning at the anniversary of a miscarriage, but much of the pain is because her husband has no recollection of the event. For him it has no longer any personal overtones. Women will remember their first experience of sexual intercourse, men are unlikely to. Women are more conscious of the great movements and forces which shape us, of creation, evolution, of the earth, the seasons, the stars, sun, moon, sea—these are all seen as part of the female rhythm and are all-embracing.² All of nature: bodies, blood, death and darkness are part of God's plan, and if men are seen or felt to be denying this, escaping from it, or exploiting, then the result is truly experienced as an ungodly mess, and the woman is hurt in her very being.

As the girl grows up she passes through a time of equality with the small boy, but later on she is undermined as she is pushed to one side, not wanted, and her diffidence and lack of self-confidence are reinforced. Puberty is the time when love and passion are more and more strongly experienced, and much inner conflict is experienced around the growing realization of sexuality and sexual differentiation; this is a time of vulnerability and fragility when dreams and reality intertwine. Often the girl has a conflictual and antagonistic attitude towards men, a hidden destructive hostility accompanied by defiance, suspicion and the need to be competitive. Often too, they feel disliked by women and their mothers are feared as jealous rivals. There is a great fear of being unattractive, disliked, not normal, inferior, never able to marry or have children. The irregularity of periods is a source of anxiety, as too the size of their breasts, especially if it should coincide with a rebellion against being a woman. Sexual desires grow stronger and encounter the barrier of guilt and fear. It is a time of enormous anxiety, and God can seem either very close or very distant and condemning. It is a time when adolescent girls need to be made aware of their gifts and abilities which are usually so much greater than they realize. Each needs confirming in the fact that she is a person first, not just a person second to sexual function. If they can be taught to believe and experience acceptance of inner chaos, there to find

a sense of Godness and self-goodness, they will discover something of their potential for unity and human fullness. Nothing needs to be denied, neither their femaleness nor their sexuality. Nothing is known of the adventure ahead as they grow to womanhood, and there is suffering in opening up to the experience. The woman's body is the channel for receiving and giving out divine energy. It receives, actively holds within itself whatever is poured in and from within transformation is wrought. As women mature and grow in love and self-actualization, so their need for intimacy becomes greater than their desire for genitality, for it is that which will most help them to maintain their individuality and identity. Women live in constant contact with and awareness of their body, and menstruation makes certain of this. It can bring hope, depression, pain, but it is a recall to be who one is, a summons to praise God for that and not to be daunted or ashamed at being so often at the mercy of one's body. It reinforces a very incarnational approach to life.

One woman has described to me how in any relationship in which there is a sense of accord, this is experienced as accompanied by, and translated by her body into sexual excitement, not very marked but there, and not sexual desire. This experience of accord at her emotional and intellectual level is experienced in terms of female sexuality. Accord rather than union was used to describe the experience, as union has a sense of completeness, whereas what is being spoken of here is transient, brief, perhaps very restricted, but always a recognizable awareness of a unity between self and someone else, or God, or the bit of the world one is in touch with at the moment. Physically one's body can only respond sexually. Emotionally and intellectually the response to these flashes of accord is both a longing to embrace, a setting free, an acceptance, delight in the relationship and a willingness to take the accompanying pain as something worthwhile, while knowing too that all is transient. Perhaps we also need to recognize that while there is increased emphasis on the key place of sexual intercourse in the lives of married couples, the place of sexuality must not be underestimated in the relationships of the married to other people, or of the unmarried in their relationships to God and everyone else. It is certain that widows experience life very vicariously, as if, deprived of a husband and the possibility of sexual intercourse, they somehow have to be cut off socially. They still exist as women in their own right and as sexually alive. Single women have to

struggle with harassment, as though they too are objects rather than vibrant people. It takes a strong sense of relatedness to God to counteract the sense of insult, hurt and diminishment experienced.

The menopause may not bring about strong changes in relating, either inwardly or outwardly. It is gradual, and little is known of the invading emotions any more than they are known and recognized at the age of puberty. The change goes on within the body. Waiting is again the name of the game. The woman at this stage wants recognition, love, security, though she will have already discovered that genital stimulation without penetration is often more pleasurable. Sexuality is not linked to procreation and intercourse, this can be a time of discovery of equality in relationships. Creativity is discovered more outside of the woman, as the psychic reorganization takes place, pointing not to a living death but to a change in life's direction. It is a time for the act of faith in her fecundity and inward knowledge that her basic fruitfulness is not a derivative of the physical ability to conceive. There is a different sort of physicality to be offered to God, and within which to experience his presence; the bridge between faith and physical reality is neither more nor less easy than at the earlier stages of experience. What continues is the search and discovery of the meaning of life, how we use it and its joy. Women feel so responsible for the survival of humanity that they cannot take it lightly. The women's peace movements highlight this.

Women do not have to be other than they are. The apostles returned from a shopping spree and were amazed to find Jesus talking to a woman: women can relate to Jesus of the gospel, they are at ease with him who accepts them as they are. The samaritan woman was astonished at the Lord's attitude. For her, as for us, life is an unfolding of the Lord's mystery in each moment, each action, each meeting, and the call of the Lord is to live 'Yes' in the innermost part of woman's being.

NOTES

¹ Treble, Phyllis: *God and the rhetoric of sexuality* (Fortress Press, 1978).

² Maitland, Sara: *A map of the new country* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983).